

It's An Ill Wind That Dies Down Just As Every Waterhole Gets Low

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MERTZON — From the middle of July through late August is the time of calm winds in the Shortgrass country. It's the season that makes windmill men flinch to think of it; cowhands wish they'd directed their lives into other fields, and ranchers who depend on windmills for their water supply are as jumpy as a kilted bagpipe player with a saggy garter belt.

Countless hours are spent gazing into half-filled water tanks. Many an agonizing afternoon is endured in watching a windmill wheel rock idly in the sullen air currents. Lucky is the outfit that doesn't have to turn to some kind of motor-powered pump.

Here at this ranch we are presently facing a windless and nearly waterless crisis. One watering over on the east side has been at the critical point for a month. Five days ago, two cowboys and myself were forced into giving up hope of wind and choosing what to us is a perilous path — the route of the pump jack.

The reason we had stalled to the last minute rests mainly in our heritage. As you may know, the father of the first cross-threaded bolt was some fumble-fingered drover. The closest thing to any mechanical device that any cowhand was ever able to repair was a broken boot jack. So our reluctance to become mechanics was justifiable. In fact, we wouldn't have been much less at home dealing sweet rolls in a tea house than we were preparing to run a four-cylinder pump engine.

However, once we had to face the problem, we began a race against time that would outmatch the wildest chariot contest ever run in Ancient Greece. Borrowed equipment was rushed to the scene. Tools were scattered across an acre of ground. Cables and chains were wrapped around buckets and oil cans. Baling wire and old inner tubes were strewn in all directions.

The ground was cut up worse than a rodeo arena, and the sum total of the whole mess would have been a challenge for the cleanup squad at Churchill Downs.

It took three 14-hour working days to finally get the pump to working. After wrestling with this monster (it must weigh 1500 pounds) until our knuckles were peeled and our backs were ruined, the first water was lifted.

In 11 minutes of pumping time, the unit made enough water for the daily requirements of one mother cow. I always shall believe that if the wild gyrations of the walking beams hadn't broken a rod away down deep in the hole, this grandfather of all pump jacks would have lowered the water table for miles around. But we'd barely had time to observe the old man-killing pump before a breakdown stopped the show.

This morning, the pump jack is skidded over to one side. To get it back into operation, we'll have to fish the broken sucker rod out of the well. The water level in the tank has dropped to a scant nine inches. Every old cow in the pasture is standing around, bawling herself into a terrific thirst. There isn't enough wind to turn a toy mill. If we make it to the windy days of September without running out of water, our luck is going to have to make a drastic change.

I guess I've seen worse wrecks than this, but it's been a long time ago.